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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the book "Building Community in Schools," by Thomas Sergiovanni. The book's thesis--that schools are better understood as social rather than as formal organizations--is based on the assumption that the universal need for belonging and connection too often is unfulfilled in schools. The book recommends that school-reform efforts should be based on school-community building and provides a moral justification for community and a clear theoretical model for changing perceptions of schools. However, the paper argues that the book is less clear when discussing the social and political forces that present challenges to schools, specifically, how to manage conflict that accompanies the development of belief/mission statements. The book does not distinguish between having a common purpose and the content of that purpose. It also fails to adequately convey the dilemmas that practitioners face or to suggest processes for overcoming them. By using ideologically palatable examples of shared beliefs while also maintaining that the content of the beliefs are not important, the book evades the question of how communities manage conflict and how they ensure full participation of members with a diversity of backgrounds and interests. (Contains nine references.) (LMI)

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Sketching Community in Schools
Uncertain Lessons for Policy and Practice

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Sketching Community in Schools
Uncertain Lessons for Policy and Practice

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Review of
Building Community in Schools, by Thomas Sergiovanni. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994. 219 p.

Three weeks ago, I was reading the morning newspaper while crossing San Francisco on a municipal transit bus. When I looked up to see if we had arrived at my stop, I noticed a sign with block letters posted above the four seats closest to the front of the bus:

FEDERAL LAW 49.CF.37-167 REQUIRES THAT THESE SEATS
MUST BE VACATED FOR SENIORS AND DISABLED PERSONS.

While I was pleased that there was a federal law to look out for the welfare of seniors and disabled persons, I was nonetheless disheartened that we needed one. It is true that without this sign, someone might not think to offer their seat to an elderly or disabled rider and that, with the sign, we can all agree on the clear and stated obligation to do so. When contractual and legal bonds replace social and communal ones, however, the connections among individuals in a society become threatened. We lose our "common sense."

In communities, writes Thomas Sergiovanni in Building Community in Schools, "we become connected for reason of commitment rather than compliance" (1994, 58). "People are bonded to each other as a result of their mutual bindings to shared values, traditions, ideas, and ideals" (61). His thesis: that we might better understand, design and run schools as social rather than formal organizations and, in particular, as communities. His reasoning: the universal need for a sense of belonging, of being connected to others and to ideas and values too often goes unfulfilled in schools as they are currently conceived. His prescription:

reformers and theoreticians alike should recognize that schooling is first and foremost about relationships between and among students and teachers, and that community building must be the basis for school reform efforts that seek to improve teaching and learning; all else will come more naturally when authentic communities flourish.

Although the book does not adequately convey the practical and ideological complexities inherent in such a task -- and I will elaborate further on these limitations -- Building Community in Schools makes two important contributions: an unashamed defense of community as an important end in its own right and a clear and easily accessible theoretical model that seeks to change the way we think about schools.

First, as a text about practice, Sergiovanni lends a fresh boldness to the arguments. Notions of the mythical rugged individual reign supreme these days in politics and in social policy. Advocates of making schools more intelligent and caring places are forced to justify their priorities by claiming that stronger school communities will increase the Nation's economic competitiveness. And back-to-basics curriculum threatens to undo decades of reforms aimed at making schools more inclusive and subject matter more representative and democratic. Meanwhile, children and teachers increasingly report feelings of isolation, alienation, and hopelessness.

Against this backdrop, Sergiovanni travels a great distance towards saying what needs to be said and he does so unapologetically. This is the strength of the book. How should we justify efforts to build community in terms of academic gains? We shouldn't, he says. We serve school breakfasts because it is important to feed hungry children, not to raise test scores. Principals emphasize improving working conditions for teachers because that is a

good thing to do. Echoing his and others' earlier work on moral education (Nel Noddings' The Challenge to Care in Schools [1992], for example), Sergiovanni persuasively argues that communities are important because people and connections between them are important. This is refreshing material for any who have felt the need to tie already morally defensible efforts to standardized measures of success, attaching community to instrumental gains. Though Sergiovanni also falls back on these instrumental claims at various points in the book, noting, for example, that Deborah Meier's Central Park East Secondary School students score higher than city and state averages on the New York State Regency Examinations" (51), he does so unnecessarily. His eloquent call for attention to meaningful relationships in schools could easily stand on its own merit as morally sound and intelligent policy and practice for schools in a democratic society.[1]

The other contribution Building Community in Schools makes is providing an accessible theoretical. Sergiovanni shifts the focus away from schools as formal organizations, built on formal agreements, rewards, and sanctions towards schools as communities brought together by common goals and moral commitments. Drawing on Ferdinand Tönnies' ([1887]; 1957) distinction between *gemeinschaft* (loosely translated as 'community') and *gesellschaft* ('society' in the formal, contractual sense), Sergiovanni demonstrates that neither extreme adequately serves as a model for school community. Rather, the real challenge is to build gemeinschaft within gesellschaft. The model for community Sergiovanni suggests demonstrates strong insights into the practical and

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[1]There are frequent references to instrumental claims like "this stance [community] pays dividends in increased student learning" (27) or "community is also a powerful means to achieve academic ends" (51). Still, each is preceded or followed by a reaffirmation of the moral justifications for making community important.

theoretical tributaries that those interested in building community in schools must cross.

He is less clear, however, when discussing the social and political forces that often turn tributaries into quagmires. His descriptions do little to convey the serious challenges schools face in creating what John Gardner has called "wholeness incorporating diversity." There are many visions of community -- some different, some dangerous. To what extent are efforts to build community in schools derailed by reformers' reluctance to confront these substantive ideological and philosophical differences? Does the ever-common invocation of the need for community and shared commitments obscure the diversity of values, ideologies, and cultures present in today's schools? By relying primarily on articles written by the schools' principals and interviews published in education newspapers and journals over in-depth case studies, this book glosses over these tough questions and ends up obscuring them entirely.[2]

Schools need to state their mission, he asserts. They need focus and clarity about their beliefs and values. But, remarkably, he goes on to argue that "the subject matter of this focus and clarity may well be secondary..."

> When accounting for the success of certain schools --"back to basics" Christian fundamentalist schools, Coalition of Essential Schools, Catholic parish schools, magnet public schools, ungraded elementary schools, or just plain-vanilla schools -- the specifics of their undergirding educational philosophy may not be key. Philosophies among successful schools differ, often dramatically.

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[2]The descriptions of Central Park East are based on conversations with Herb Rosenfeld and from articles by Deborah Meier, the schools co-founders. The descriptions of Köln-Holweide, are based on an interview with Anne Ratzki, the school's Principal, published in a 1988 issue of American Educator (34). Other descriptions are generally attributed to secondary sources such as the edited volume Public Schools That Work: Building Community or "The Denali Project: An Interview" from the Fairbanks, Alaska Department of Education. Chapter 10 (of 11) is devoted mostly to the Jackson-Keller School in San Antonio, Texas and seems to be the first school in which primary research was conducted by Sergiovanni and his colleague, Margaret Burns.

> Instead, success seems to be related to the fact that though substance differs, the schools have achieved focus and clarity and have embodied them in a unified practice (100).

To illustrate, he presents the reader with various "successful" schools' mission statements. "Is what we're doing consistent with what we believe?" becomes the guiding question schools should ask to become authentic communities (109). After reading about the various exemplary schools cited in the book, I am left wanting to know (1) Do beliefs matter at all? What beliefs are important to share? (2) How should teachers and administrators manage the conflicts inherent in putting any significant system of beliefs into practice? Sergiovanni conveys little about how school communities might accomplish such a fraught task.

If teachers at Central Park East decide that their middle school curriculum should be interdisciplinary and social studies-driven, how should the community accommodate a teacher who wants to teach math in a much more traditional way and with fewer links to other subjects? He doesn't say. Hawthorne Elementary School, Sergiovanni notes, has adopted a curriculum based on E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987). Should a teacher at this school who thinks that a critical understanding of how knowledge is constructed is more important than the assimilation of a particular cannon be fired? He doesn't say. Or the school where one group of teachers would like parents to have a major influence in setting the educational mission of the school and choosing the textbooks while another group would prefer to contain the role parents play? Or one in which one group of teachers and parents would choose an Afro-centric curriculum while another group prefers a more traditional curriculum? These are the topics of real disputes in schools. Building Community in Schools does not convey the institutional structures or

activities at work in the studied schools. How do they accommodate beliefs that are not shared? He doesn't say.

After reading about schools well-known for their emphasis on community like Central Park East and lesser known examples such as the Jackson-Keller School in Antonio, Texas, I am still left asking what community means to these teachers and students. They have a "commitment to personalized relationships and to caring," and "mutual shared obligations and commitments." They are "motivated by a sense of what was right and good, a desire to serve others, and a desire to serve ideals." Christ the King School believes in "acceptance of all children." But these are slogans. Whose ideals? What do these teachers and students believe in? What kind of world do they strive for? Avoiding these more thorny concerns, Sergiovanni maintains that what is important is that beliefs are shared. But does he care whether the beliefs that are shared are worth sharing?

Clearly he does which makes reading the book all the more frustrating. All of the examples of shared beliefs cited in the book are ones on which most progressive educators can agree. Even the Christian fundamentalist school -- usually representing the type of educational philosophy invoked to demonstrate the difficulties of wholeheartedly embracing notions of community -- has a special emphasis on multicultural curriculum and hopes to help students "go beyond sympathy to empathy when viewing other cultures" (101). But what about the more controversial fundamentalist schools like the one portrayed in Alan Peshkin's God's Choice? Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Allan Bloom (1987) would both prefer a return to traditional communities with "traditional" values. Schools based on these beliefs would look different from those based on John Dewey's vision of a democratic school

(1916). We can all agree that schools must have a common purpose. But the purpose matters, not just the act of having one, and here is where Sergiovanni's guidelines end and the truly difficult work of community-building begins.

Diversity is central to all discussions about community. We hear about words like "tolerance," "multicultural perspective," and "diversity of ideas." But surprisingly few works address the tough dilemmas that emerge when practitioners pursue the ideals of democratic and egalitarian communities, hoping to become neither excessively insular nor aimlessly diffuse. One can wink at the value of dissent, but without creating the space for it and the institutional structures that can encourage and manage it, dissent is more likely to be suppressed or ignored than heard and considered. Dozens of reformers and policy-makers eloquently and persuasively advocate working together, overlooking differences, and creating friendlier, more open work settings without acknowledging insidious power imbalances and the resulting sense of impotence that threaten to undo so many reform efforts.

Unfortunately, Building Community in Schools, though eloquently conveying the need for community, fails to adequately convey the dilemmas that practitioners face nor suggest processes for overcoming them. By using ideologically palatable examples of beliefs that faculties share and maintaining all the while that the content of the beliefs are not important, Sergiovanni evades the obligation of plodding through the muck, the ambiguity, and the mystery of how communities succeed and fail to manage conflict and how they ensure full participation of members with a diversity of backgrounds and interests.

> Schools can become [among other types of community] inclusive communities where differences are brought together into a mutually respectful whole [but] schools must first become places where members have developed a community of mind that bonds them together in a special way and binds them to a shared ideology (xvii).

In the everyday life of schools, the beliefs and the ideology as well as how they are elicited matter. There are philosophical, political, and ideological commitments that allow people to make relationships priorities, to create spaces that are inclusive, and a school culture that is community-oriented. These commitments are sometimes incompatible with, for example, a belief that the major books of one culture represented in the school community are less important for the curriculum than those of another or support of a law that denies one group of children of the community education or health services.

The practical task of community building in schools must follow the development of not only a clear conceptualization of community but also of the specific values and commitments that such a conceptualization embodies. Acknowledging and exploring the difficulties involved in such an undertaking is the first step towards creating and recreating schools in which students, teachers, and administrators engage in meaningful and communal relationships. And I would add, it is also the first step towards a more just and caring society in which, among other important consequences, seniors and disabled persons get seats on buses even when there is no sign demanding as much.

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